

MEMORANDUM FOR:

OLL 84-3661

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The Director of Central Intelligence  
Washington, D.C. 20505

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National Intelligence Council

28 June 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: Herbert E. Meyer, Vice Chairman  
National Intelligence Council

SUBJECT: What Should We Do About The Russians?

1. For nearly forty years now, we and our predecessors in the intelligence and foreign-policymaking communities have devoted the bulk of our time and energies to the search for an answer to one single question: What should we do about the Russians?

2. This search has taken on a special urgency during the last several months, as Soviet events, actions, and attitudes have combined to focus unprecedented attention on the superpower rivalry and, once more, raised the specter of a serious US-Soviet collision: The Soviets have walked out on three sets of arms-reduction talks, buried Yuri Andropov after a brief but violent reign that included the shootdown of KAL Flight 007, admitted publicly that for a year they had been lying about Andropov's state of health, and selected the visibly ailing Konstantin Chernenko as their new leader. The Soviets have harassed Western commercial flights to and from Berlin, fired on a US Army helicopter along the German-Czech border, and announced the presence of nuclear-armed Soviet submarines off the US East Coast. They have launched a set of military exercises that scared the wits out of some Western observers, boycotted the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles, unleashed an anti-US propaganda barrage more strident and sustained than any in recent memory, and generally tried to whip up a war scare that in tone and substance bears an uncanny resemblance to the one that occurred in 1927, which historians now believe Stalin cooked up as part of a (successful) effort to quash domestic enemies.

3. As a participant in the current flurry of meetings, brainstorming sessions, water-cooler conversations, working lunches, even dinner parties--and as an avid student of earlier such flurries--I am struck of a recurring flaw: We always focus on the need for a policy;

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we never focus on the need for a strategy. But without a strategy--the deployment of a nation's political, economic, psychological, and military forces to afford the maximum support to its adopted policies--any policy regardless of its merit will lack the strength to survive when trouble strikes. Little wonder that so many of the Soviet policies we have pursued during the last forty years--under Republicans, Democrats, liberals, and conservatives--have ultimately been blown away like flimsy buildings by tornados.

4. An effective strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union is now within our grasp, and it is the purpose of this memo to spell it out. The key to this strategy lies in a new, almost revolutionary perception of the Soviet Union itself that is taking hold among specialists, scholars, and observers throughout the West. This perception is one that I share--in part because it goes a long way toward explaining current Soviet behavior--and which I detailed in an earlier memo entitled Why Is the World So Dangerous? To briefly recapitulate:

-- After 67 years of communist rule, the Soviet Union remains a nineteenth-century-style empire, comprised of more than 100 nationality groups and dominated by the Russians. There is not one major nationality group that is content with the present, Russian-controlled arrangement; not one that does not yearn for its political and economic freedom.

-- Since the imperial system is itself fatally flawed, all empires eventually decay. And at long last history seems to be catching up with the world's last surviving empire. Decades of over-emphasis on military production have wrecked the country's civilian industrial and technological base. More precisely, the Soviets have failed miserably to generate the kinds of innovations on which modern economies are increasingly dependent: robotics, micro-electronics, computerized communications and information-processing systems. Even if the Soviets could develop such systems, they could not deploy them without losing the political control on which the Communist Party depends for its very survival. For after 40 years of fear among Western intellectuals that technology would lead inexorably to Big Brother societies throughout the world, it now turns out that technology, in the form of personal computers and the like, has put communications and information processing beyond the control of any central authority. Unwilling and unable to develop and deploy innovations like these--as we in the West are doing with such robust enthusiasm--the Soviet Union now can produce little but weapons. As a result, the Soviet economy has become stagnant and may even be starting to shrink--a trend that already has begun to make even the production of weapons more costly and inefficient.

-- At the same time, The Soviet Union has become a demographic basket-case. Today only about half the country's

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population can speak Russian; for an industrialized, technologically-advanced society, this is intolerable. Moreover, so low has been the Russian birthrate that in coming years the able-bodied working-age population of the Russian Republic, which contains roughly two-thirds of the Soviet Union's total industrial production capacity, will actually decline. This is not merely a drop in the growth rate; it is a drop in the total number of warm bodies showing up each morning, drunk or sober, for work. Moreover, high birthrates in the Moslem republics have begun to soak up vast amounts of investment for schools, hospitals, roads, and so forth. Thus, fewer and fewer Russians must work harder and harder to support more and more non-Russians. This sort of thing cannot go on indefinitely. Nor can the trend itself be reversed in less than several decades.

-- All this is compounded by a growing contentiousness and disarray within the communist world itself. Moscow's efforts to ease domestic economic pressures by shifting the burden to its East European satellites are meeting with growing resistance from satellite leaders, who rightly fear for their own grips on power. One reflection of this fear is the rising level of opposition among East European leaders to Moscow's plans for higher levels of defense spending by the satellites; another is these leaders' unprecedented vocal efforts to coax the Soviets back to the arms-reduction tables. Obviously the Soviets have sufficient military power to get their way, but now the chances are increasing that the Soviets will need to use this power. And elsewhere in the communist world--against every tenet of Marxist philosophy--communist nations are waging war among themselves. More precisely, the Soviet Union and China, having fought one another along their common border, are now fighting against or through their respective surrogates: China versus Vietnam; Vietnam versus Kampuchea.

5. From Moscow's point of view, history could not have chosen a worse moment to catch up with the Soviet empire. After a period of drift, the US is once again leading the West forward:

-- Our own economy is recovering--growth has lately been running at an annual rate of more than 9 percent, a level that delights everyone except the gloom-and-doom mongers on Wall Street--with the only argument among serious economists focusing on the size and breadth of the boom.

-- US defense spending is up, with the debate in Congress and on the campaign hustings focusing only on the proper size of the increase.

-- We and our allies have begun to limit the flow of credits to the Soviet Union.

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-- We and our allies have begun to staunch the hemorrhage of technology to the Soviet Union.

-- With initial deployment of Pershing IIs and cruise missiles, NATO is at last beginning to change the balance of power in Europe back to its favor.

-- With the emergence of five anti-communist insurgencies--in Nicaragua, Mozambique, Angola, Kampuchea, and Afghanistan--the Soviet drive for Third World dominance has been slowed. And, of course, our own country's use of military power to set free Grenada has shattered the myth that communist revolutions are irreversible. Now it is their dominoes that are toppling.

6. Moreover, we now stand on the threshold of an historic change in the very nature of warfare. Technology is shifting the advantage from offense to defense. Since the US is a defensive power while the Soviet Union remains an offensive one, the long-term edge is now moving in our direction. This, of course, is why the Soviets are so worried by our own emphasis on high-technology weapons such as cruise missiles and precision-guided munitions; it means that the US has both recognized and acted upon the new reality. This also explains why the Soviets are having fits over the President's Strategic Defense Initiative, although this is a longer term project. Given our country's awesome record of success when we combine our scientific and technological prowess with our industrial strength--the Manhattan and Apollo projects come to mind--the Soviets must assume that eventually we will succeed. And when we do, Soviet rockets will cease to be a threat to anyone.

7. From the moment that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union seized power back in 1917, the primary thrust of its propaganda has been to convince not only its own people but also those of us in the West that the Party's revolution is irreversible; that the Soviet Union as organized by Lenin & Co. is a stable, permanent state. So successful has been this propaganda effort that for decades the conventional wisdom here in the West has been just this: that the Soviet Union is here to stay. One corollary of the conventional wisdom is that the US-Soviet rivalry is itself a permanent feature of life on earth.

8. Yet the new perspective that I outlined in Why Is the World So Dangerous, and which I have briefly recapped here, fundamentally challenges both the conventional wisdom and its corollary. This perspective recognizes the Soviet Union for what it is--an empire--and accepts that like all empires this one must eventually decay. Moreover, this perspective holds that the beginnings of this decay are now evident. Indeed, since publication of that earlier memo information has continued to accumulate which suggests that the decay is progressing:

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-- The selection of Konstantin Chernenko as Andropov's successor indicates strongly that the bureaucracy could not stomach even the modest economic reform efforts that were begun after Brezhnev's death. The political leadership has virtually ceased to talk of reform; stagnation thus is likely to continue.

-- Living standards in the Soviet Union are beginning to decline. Marshall Goldman, the Harvard University Soviet specialist, now reports that food is in short supply outside the Moscow-Leningrad area and that rationing has been imposed in 12 cities. According to recent issues of published Soviet medical literature, five of seven key communicable diseases are now out of control: polio, diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough, measles. Georgetown University demographer Murray Feshbach--among the most competent and reliable students of Soviet life--reports that according to published Soviet statistics, so high is the incidence of measles that it now stands fractionally below the level at which epidemiologists attribute the problem to mass malnutrition. Feshbach's earlier research has shown that throughout the Soviet Union infant mortality is rising and life expectancy is falling.

-- A sense of deep pessimism has taken hold among the Soviet people. One reflection of this is the abortion rate, which for the Soviet Union as a whole is between 60 percent and 70 percent, and which for Slavs and Balts is 75 percent to 80 percent. We simply cannot attribute these staggering rates entirely to the low quality of available birth-control products and to decisions by sensible, practical parents to limit the size of their families because their apartments lack sufficient space for comfort. Rather, we must view these rates, at least partly, as an indication of the average couple's judgment of life in the Soviet Union. As Frank Shakespeare puts it, these abortion rates reflect a vision of the future that is bleak and despairing almost to the point of national suicide.

-- Artistic works are often a leading indicator of a society's perception of its own prospects, and Soviet artists are turning now to themes of looming decline. A singer/poet named Bulat Okudzhava has lately been serenading audiences at a Moscow cabaret with a little number that strikingly compares today's Soviet Union with the Roman empire in its last days. Here's the first verse:

"The Roman Empire at the time of the decline  
Maintained the appearance of firm order.  
The leader was in his place, with his comrades in  
arms at his sides,  
Life was wonderful, judging by reports.

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But the critics will say that the expression 'comrade in arms' is not a Roman detail, That this mistake deprives the whole song of meaning. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps it isn't Roman...."

-- For the first time ever, articles are appearing in Soviet newspapers and magazines that talk about "the contradictions of socialism," and vaguely suggest the need for basic structural changes. Given the limits of what one can say in the Soviet press--and remain at large to say again--this is explosive stuff indeed. Clearly, commentators are sending strong signals that in their view fundamental changes are needed, and the sooner the better, if the regime is to survive in its present form.

9. This growing sense of pessimism and looming decline may well account for much of current Soviet behavior. In a vague but very profound way, Soviet leaders are starting to recognize that something has gone hideously wrong. We are not talking here about merely a bad stretch in relations with the US or a temporary run of bad luck; we are talking here of a perceived fundamental shift in the balance of future power. History is no longer on Moscow's side--if ever it was--and Soviet leaders sense they lack the wit, the energy, the resources, and above all the time, to win it back. Thus the current burst of vicious, vitriolic rhetoric and action. It is like the first reaction of a very nasty man whose career has been soaring from triumph to triumph over the broken bodies of his enemies--and who with final victory in sight has just learned he has a terminal illness.

10. The implications of all this are staggering. If indeed the Soviet Union is an empire at the beginning of its decline, one of three courses is likely:

-- The Soviets could undertake fundamental reforms. This remains a possibility, and obviously we must be alert to any indicators. But it seems probable that the Soviet leadership will not make the changes necessary to either reverse these trends or cope with them. Kremlin leaders could boost their country's economic growth rate only by slashing the defense budget or by enacting massive economic reforms. Either remedy would threaten the Communist Party's grip on power, and this is a price that Kremlin leaders have always been loath to pay. The demographic nightmare is equally difficult to end. Moscow cannot transfer industrial-production capacity from the Russian to the non-Russian, and especially non-Slav, republics. Doing so would give these republics more power over Moscow than Moscow is willing to risk. And Moscow cannot import workers to Russian factories from Moslem republics because these workers (a) don't speak Russian, (b) don't want to come, and (c) would be bitterly

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resented by Russian workers, who would be required to share scarce housing and food with individuals they view as racially inferior.

-- The Soviets could blow it. That is, they could fail to stop their empire's decay and, over time, allow the Soviet Union to drift into a downward spiral from which would emerge a different sort of society. To be sure, we have no idea of what this successor society would look like. It might be a "better" society, which is to say a freer and more democratic one. Or it might be different from the present society but every bit as mean and repressive. And we can only guess at the future relationship between the Russian Republic--the imperial power, so to speak--and the fourteen non-Russian republics that now comprise the Soviet Union. But clearly, any sort of imperial free fall would produce a political structure that, at least for a while, would be less threatening to the West than the current regime.

-- The Soviets could decide to go for it. Faced with a "use-it-or-lose-it" situation, Soviet leaders could choose a high-risk course designed to change the correlation of forces before it is too late to do so. As you recall, it is this option that was the focus of Why Is the World So Dangerous? The thrust of my argument there was that as Soviet leaders perceive that time is no longer an ally, the range of options they would be willing to consider will inevitably widen. Thus we must prepare for the possibility that the Soviets will do something very, very dangerous--for instance a grab for the Persian Gulf, an attack on Western Europe, even a first strike on the US. Again, as in that earlier memo, I emphasize that I do not predict any of these actions. I merely point out--and this is worrisome enough--that to some Soviets these actions may no longer be too risky to consider. Thus my concern that the coming years will be the most dangerous that we have ever known.

11. IT IS PRECISELY BECAUSE THE COMING YEARS WILL BE SO DANGEROUS THAT WE NEED TO DESIGN, ARTICULATE, AND IMPLEMENT A STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH THE SOVIET UNION THAT WILL AVOID WAR. THE THRUST OF THIS STRATEGY, SIMPLY PUT, SHOULD BE TO DENY THE SOVIETS AN EXTERNAL SOLUTION TO THEIR PROBLEM. The logic runs like this:

-- The Soviet Union is the world's last empire, and after 67 years of communism it has entered its terminal phase. We should be no more surprised, or alarmed, or relieved about this than by the sunset at day's end; it is merely inevitable, and our choice is not whether to accept it but how best to respond. The only operational question is the rate of descent.

-- We will do nothing whatever to try and "bring down" the Soviet regime. More bluntly, we are not going to charge

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in there throwing bombs at them. Any effort of this sort, by any country, would be dangerously stupid. We won't engage in this sort of activity, and we will stop anybody else who tries. We will let the Soviet Union's rate of decline be managed by our strongest ally: history.

-- By the same token, we won't go out of our way to prop up the faltering Soviet regime. It's easy to see why in coming years the Soviets will seek massive amounts of Western financial and technical assistance. But we and our allies have learned the hard way that the Soviets use whatever help we give not to improve their country's standard of living but rather to build and deploy more weapons. You don't loan a man money--at any rate of interest--if you know from experience that rather than feed his family he'll buy a gun and rob your own bank. Putting aside common sense and morality--which bankers have been known to do--this sort of business is financially dumb. The tiny profit is more than wiped out by the expense of additional robbery insurance and physical security measures. When Soviet officials come calling for economic and technological help, we should politely but firmly turn them away. And we should keep them from stealing what they want.

-- Our hope is that Soviet leaders will turn their considerable skills and energies to reforming their system. We and our allies would like nothing better than a stable, secure, prosperous, free Soviet Union. If Moscow will display even the smallest sign of moving in this direction, we and our allies should and will help in every way we can. Indeed, we yearn to negotiate seriously with the Soviet Union across the entire spectrum of contentious issues--arms reduction, of course, but also the sorts of economic, scientific, technological, and environmental agreements that would help improve standards of living and lessen the dangers of war throughout the world.

-- Our concern is that Soviet leaders will prove unwilling, or unable, to undertake fundamental reforms. And if they can't, or won't, well that's too bad. The decline of an empire is never a very pleasant thing for those who live within its borders, and we wish all Soviet peoples the best of luck as they go about the difficult business of coping with the transformation of the current political structure into something else--something we hope and pray will serve them better than the structure they have now.

-- Our goal is to make absolutely certain that at no time during the coming years do Soviet leaders conclude that they can somehow save themselves by destroying us. This is more than merely protecting ourselves from falling bricks. That's easy. We need to anticipate the sorts of aggressive actions that a faltering empire might be tempted to take and which, if successful, would either reverse the decline or slow

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it down. And we need to establish a set of conditions under which, should in fact the Soviets be tempted, they will in the end resist on grounds that it just wouldn't work. It's a bit like establishing conditions in a neighborhood so that a hungry drifter who peers through the kitchen window of a house and sees a twenty-dollar bill lying on the table decides, in the end, to leave it there for fear he couldn't get away with it. Perhaps in time we could even get that drifter to knock politely on the door, and to ask if there is any work that needs doing.

12. Obviously, we will need a strong defense to make this strategy work. More precisely, we will need to prevent the Soviets from cutting off access to oil and other raw materials that we and our allies import from Third World countries--as they are attempting to do now in the Persian Gulf and in southern Africa. We must continue to resist Soviet efforts to gobble up fragile countries, and by doing so turning these countries into bases for the re-export of revolution--as they are attempting to do now in Central America. We must be sufficiently strong to block the Soviets from driving a political wedge between ourselves and our allies--as they are attempting to do now in Western Europe. And, at all costs, we must be so strong defensively that even in their worst moments, Soviet leaders won't be tempted to let their missiles fly in some sort of desperate, last-ditch gamble to destroy everybody in hopes that they will emerge in control of the wreckage.

13. A strategy of denying the Soviets an external solution to their problem will generate support for a strong defense because it offers the one thing people rightly demand for support of any sacrifice: hope. Remember that by convincing people the Soviet empire will last forever, Moscow's propaganda network has also convinced people that the US-Soviet rivalry is a permanent feature of life on earth. This, in turn, has led to a growing perception that all our defense spending achieves nothing. They spend, we spend, weapons become more and more deadly, and the cycle goes on forever; the chances inevitably grow that something awful will happen, if not by design then by accident. So depressing and so genuinely frightening is this prospect that more and more people no longer have the will to face it, and instead they turn toward silly and sometimes dangerous schemes they are told will somehow break the cycle. In this category I would include the idea of a nuclear freeze, and the various proposals floating around that, in one guise or another, would amount to unilateral disarmament. In despair, people forget the lesson that Paul Nitze and Dean Acheson stated so eloquently back in 1950, in their famous memorandum, NSC-68: "No people in history have ever survived who thought they could protect their freedom by making themselves inoffensive to their enemies." This strategy of denying the Soviets an external solution to their problem will sustain and even generate support for a strong defense--not only among Americans but among our allies as well--because it suggests that if we can hold on for a while longer, the need for such sacrifice will decline.

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14. Bear in mind that what I outline here is a strategy, not a policy. It is meant to serve as a guide to the formulation of specific policies, and as a foundation for those policies we choose. Should we engage in ASAT negotiations with the Soviets? Should we seek a summit? Should we put a new START proposal on the table in Geneva? Should we sell them grain? How should we handle the leftward drifts of Suriname and Guyana? No strategy can--or should--dictate the answers to questions like these. Too much will--and should--depend on circumstances of the moment and on our national needs and interests at the time. A strategy of denying the Soviets an external solution to their problem is a long-term venture, with zigs and zags inevitable and even useful along the way. Flexibility is not an antonym of strength, but rather a source of it.

15. In pursuing this strategy through the policy battles that inevitably lie ahead, nothing will be more vital than a precise knowledge of the Soviets' state of readiness and, even more important, their state of mind. In essence, we need to put that country and its various elites in a sort of intensive-care monitoring system. We must do even more than we do now--which is a lot--to track the development and deployment of weapons and troops, the state of the Soviet economy, and the prospects for Soviet science and technology. And to an extent that we have never done before or needed to do, we must track the mood of Soviet elites--political leaders, industrial chieftains, military figures, scientists, indeed all members of the Soviet intelligentsia. For when all is said and done, it is the mood of these people--the degree of their pessimism and their judgments of their country's prospects--that will warn us either that the Soviet Union is preparing for major reforms, edging toward a dangerous, "use-it-or-lose-it" decision, or merely giving up and accepting its descent into history. At the same time, we need to make certain that these Soviet elites understand us more accurately than they have ever understood us up to now--our military strength of course, but more importantly the strength of our will to survive as a free people and our willingness to assist them if only they will cease to threaten our own survival.

16. Let me give you some indication of how people will react to all this. I have tried out my proposed strategy on several dozen political figures, journalists, Soviet specialists, and public-affairs-minded friends and acquaintances. The professional doves reject my proposed strategy on grounds that it requires continued high levels of defense spending, provides a rationale for our current efforts in Central America, encourages support for our Strategic Defense Initiative, and in general points the way toward a post-Soviet world in which the US would likely be the only superpower. The professional hawks reject my proposed strategy on the grounds--so help me--that it will be viewed as a godsend by the professional doves. As the hawks see it, this perception of the Soviet Union as a declining empire will give

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doves the rhetorical ammunition to defeat many of our current initiatives. "For heaven's sake, let's not poke sticks at a wounded bear. He's dangerous, so let's back off and do nothing--nothing--the bear might possibly view as threatening," the doves will say. Or so fear the hawks. My own view is that hawks and doves have been making the same arguments for so long, and have become so proficient at making their respective arguments, that these negative reactions are an instinctive response to something new. On the other hand, there is a school of thought which holds that any strategy opposed with equal vehemence by extremists on both ends of the political spectrum is probably just right.

17. One immediate benefit will derive from this long-term strategy. It will help to dampen one of the most bitter and corrosive debates that has ever raged among Americans and among our allies, and one that I fear over time will tear the fabric of our societies. On the one side are those of us who want peace so badly that we are willing to pay any price for it. On the other side are those of us who also want peace badly, but who believe that peace without freedom would be intolerable and, in the long run, violently unstable. With the strategy that I have outlined here, this debate will peter out as people come to understand that it is not necessary to choose. We will have peace. And we will be free.



Herbert E. Meyer

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